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Year0001 om brytningen med Yung Lean: "Det är en sorg att förlora vänskapen"

Bon

20–25 minutes

In the spring of 2015, everything landed in Emilio Fagones's lap.

It was a very messy time.

For over a year he had been out on tour as a manager for an then-year-old-year-old Jonatan Leando, who had just made it through internationally as Yung Lean. The debut album *Unknown Memory* came in the fall of 2014, before that, Lean had already played across Europe. After his North American tour, Jonathan ended up in Miami. His American tour manager Barron Machat arranged accommodation and a studio by the sea.

The idea was for Yung Lean and artist colleagues Yung Sherman and Bladee to record a new album. But the wild tour life, with intensely partying and creaking, also continued in Florida. After a few months, Yung Lean suffered from a drug-related psychosis, and Barron died in a car accident.

"The tour life takes a lot of energy," Emilio said. I had already worked around the clock in what felt like an eternity. Then Barron died and Jonathan ended up in the psyche. Everything was very sad, while I felt great pressure to control the situation.

At home in Stockholm, manager Oskar Ekman was also in a difficult position.

After more than a year of work in Oskar's studio on Kungsholmen, his client Lomanus, had released *Love Songs* in the summer of 2014. It became one of the most acclaimed albums of the year and Lorentz was nominated for five Grammys, the most of all artists that year. But at the gala, he was only rewarded with a statuette in the hip-hop category. Oskar was disappointed that Lorentz had not been named Artist of the Year, but was comforted by the promising prospects.

He imagined Lorentz as an established arena artist, but his client did not share the vision.

Lorentz wanted *to trap* out. He wanted to get braids and rap on hard staircases. I saw a different direction for him, more as a mix of Drake and Mauro Scocco, but he wanted to steer the boat himself.

He ended up kicking me. It took very hard, although today I can see that I still had a lot to learn in the managerial profession.

That spring, 2015, Oskar stood without assignment with an uncertain future. Emilio, recently returned from Miami, suggested a meeting. They had gotten to know each other as managers for two of Sweden's biggest hip hop promises. Yung Lean and his collaborators in Drain Gang and Sad Boys recorded their early music in Oskar's studio.

They were only going to have one coffee, but instead the meeting was pulled out to a long walk around Tantolunden. Emilio had a need to talk about the chaos during the tour, about being a manager for a barely adult artist who had already experienced many tragedies so early in his career. He was looking for a business partner who could help him. Someone to

share their vision with.

In addition to the drama in Miami, a number of legal question marks awaited. Yung Lean's first album was hosted by Barron Machat's record label and was tied to an American distribution agreement. Who really owned the rights was unclear.

"Everything was up in the air," Oskar said. We contacted Barron's dad Steven and tried to get him to send over all documentation: agreements, receipts... We waited for settlements around what the music earned so we could pay the performers, and secure the master's rights to Jonathan's music.

“But Steven refused to give up the material.

Oskar and Emilio needed to create a solid foundation for Yung Lean and other members of Sad Boys/Drain Gang. They decided to start a company that would both serve as a management and record label.

"The artists we worked with all had such strong artistic expressions and wills," Emilio said. We thought the best thing would be to create a kind of *white cube*, a neutral platform so great that every artist could freely present their vision. The aim was to fully manage their careers without limiting their creativity.

Oskar develops:

“The whole business arose from the need for a functioning structure. We would take care of all the business and administrative parts of their careers, and the performers could continue to make music on their terms. But we saw ourselves as managers – managers who also released records.

Year0001, pronounced “year one”. The company name was chosen by Emilio and symbolized a new beginning – a first step away from the messiness.

At the same time as the legal issues dragged on, the files with the music that Lean recorded in Miami were missing. They were scattered on different hard drives and no one really knew where they were – until it turned out that everything was gathered at Steven Machat.

"It was like a full-time job to get the files," Emilio said. Once we succeeded, it remained to be finished. I remember sitting with [the producer] God in the studio in Stockholm, he hadn't been in Miami when the songs were recorded. It was very special.

“I was just trying to be there and supporting as much as possible.

Eventually, Yung recovered Lean. The release date for his second album *Warlord* was set for February 2016. But just days after the announcement, Steven Machat leaked the demo versions online. When Year0001 managed to pick down the unfinished material, he responded with lawsuit. A lengthy legal process began, and it would take several years before Emilio and Oskar finally got it right.

They were finally able to start looking ahead.

Year0001's office is located in a turn-of-the-century house on Hornsgatan and extends over 300 square meters. Just inside the entrance there is the kitchen and from there the corridor leads both ways. When Oskar receives, it is a quiet day in the office, the ten employees in addition to him and Emilio are away on various assignments – oversee shootings and rowing with PR and tours for the company’s twenty artists and groups. Oskar leads into an airy room with low sofas, packed with vinyl records.

Oskar Ekman was born in 1982, grew up in Gislaved and played in rock bands during his teens. Immediately after high school he

moved to Stockholm. The year was 2001 and the favorite team Hammarby had just won the football allsvenskan. He got a job as an agent at the booking company Luger, everything looked bright. But after a few years, Luger was sold to the global giant Live Nation.

I checked out mentally. I did not want to sit and make forecasts for the next twelve months, take into account the stock market and the stock exchange. I thought I was too punk for that.

Oskar Ekman is a former bassist in the indie band Last Days of April and guitarist in hardcore band Nine (Picture: Sion Sareld)

For a while, he considered applying for a job at an advertising agency but hesitated and never made a blow in the matter.

“I think it was my calling to work with artists. I have no talent other than music. It's always been my thing.

He remained at Luger barely a decade in total, before flooring by Lorentz's early demos in the early tens.

A few years after Oskar's move to the capital, Emilio Fagone, who is slightly younger, made the same journey from Hässleholm. As a teenager, he and his friends were drawn towards the West Swedish indie scene, both for the sake of music and for the event. Particularly attracted the indie bands Tough Alliance and The Embassy, and their label Service.

Emilio sits at the corner of the restaurant at Stockholm City Hotel, with her dog resting at her feet, remembering back:

"I was very fascinated," he said. That was the whole thing about artists, labels and clubs who together arranged nice parties, it was good music and good vibe. I thought, “I wonder how to do this?”

– I started dreaming of having a record label and choosing artists, working with the music, events and the visual presentation. Tie the whole bag together.

In Stockholm, Emilio began to arrange club evenings with DJs and artist performances. His goal was to work with music, he just didn't really know how.

That's when he, via Soundcloud, discovered 16-year-old Jonatan Leandoer. Emilio wanted to book him, but Lean was too young to play in a nightclub.

“Right then we had our nights at Under Bron, so I had to reconsider. A friend in Gothenburg tipped off about the art gallery Red Stone that usually has gigs. So it had to be there. It was full in the audience. Lean brought God with him, and because they only had a few songs out they played the same track several times over.

It was maxed out. For me, it became clear that they were stars.

Emilio wondered if Lean needed a manager, but the young artist had no idea what that meant. Gradually, Emilio started helping with bookings, until he finally fully assumed responsibility for Yung Lean's career.

In August 2013, Emilio co-hosted arranging the one-day festival Retreat at the Garden, where Yung Lean, Team Rockit and Baba Stiltz played. (Picture: Sion Sareld)

Although Year0001 was being drawn with legal difficulties, the company managed to release music at a steady pace. In addition to Yung Leans *Warlord*, who arrived in 2016, they published projects with the rest of the collective members: Yung Sherman and God, Bladee, Ecco2K, Thaiboy Digital and Whitearmor.

Lean and the gang once again embarked on international tour, in parallel with Emilio and Oskar continuing to build their catalogue. Among the releases were at this time the alternative pop group Team Rockit and krautrockarna Viagra Boys, who released their first EP on the company in the spring of 2016.

Year0001 evolved over time into a wider creative hub. In addition to the representation of artists and record releases, the company arranged music events, festivals, club nights and art exhibitions. In this way, they built up a strong and clear identity.

Soon Emilio and Oskar noticed that Year0001 gathered their own fans, not least thanks to Yung Lean's impact.

"The idea was never that we would become a public brand," Emilio said. The first few years we didn't even exist on social media. We had a simple landing page where you could sign up for newsletters. But it reached a point where we needed to start communicating to the artists, because they weren't particularly interested in informing about the tour dates, merch and other things that felt for business.

With that came a following.

The Year0001 had gained momentum and released five-six records a year. Revenue began to grow, the majority were reinvested in the artists and the business. For a few years, the team consisted only of Emilio, Oskar and a co-worker who was responsible for merch, but from 2019 they needed to hire more.

So, just after all, everything had begun to fall into place, the pandemic came. Overnight, the conditions for the entire industry changed.

"Honestly, it was a good period for me personally," Oskar said. Everyone was just home and creating music. I could turn the pace down, hang out more with my wife. You got time to think and I actually remember that I got a strong feeling that this was the purpose of my life, to help artists create music.

Although the pandemic brought problems, it became for some artists still favorable.

“Bladee, Ecco2K, Thaiboy Digital and Whitearmor grew enormously during that time. They became superstars. People had sat at home listening to their music, and I think it created a pent-up need.

In 2022, after the pandemic, Drain Gang once again travelled into the world on a tour in two stages: first Europe, Britain and

Russia, where the sadboy culture is incredibly large. Followed by the United States and Canada.

Shortly after the tour ended, rumors began circulating. New songs from the rappers in the collectives contained lyrics about greed and percentages. In addition, Lean had started releasing music through his own record label.

However, it took until the end of 2024 before Yung Lean himself issued the announcement. On his Instagram, he posted a statement that he left Year0001, accusing the company of unauthorized having sold his merch. Soon, the rest of the Sad Boys and the Drain Gang announced they had also left the company.

In response, Year0001 published its own statement: all merch had been sold according to written agreements and the artists received part of the proceeds. The same was true for their music. Otherwise, they did not provide any further explanations.

"We haven't spoken directly to the media lately, Oskar said. What happened has affected us. You easily get a little paranoid and try to protect yourself.

I don’t really have a problem talking. Sooner or later, we'll have to bring it up.

What really went wrong? Emilio pauses a little and ponders.

Yes, he said. In fact, it is not so easy to answer.

Oskar and Emilio at Year0001's office (Picture: Zion Sareld)

The dispute with the artists is still not fully investigated, although the collaboration is definitely completed.

According to Year0001, merch sales are about a misunderstanding. Oskar and his wife were given access to a local and decided to open a record store. But the record delivery was delayed and the venue was empty.

– Emilio and I thought: “We have a lot of merch lying around. We start a popup in the room.” It was something we have often done over the years, during the name Year0001 Market. When we went out with the information, I think Jonathan interpreted it as that we had printed new Yung Lean-merch. I think it set off thoughts that we tried to capitalize the wrong way, but in fact we only sold material that was already in the online store.

Another dispute concerned the Drain Gang's world tour after the pandemic and the economy around it. Although the tour included thirty-five gigs, it brought in no revenue.

"After the pandemic, all the artists on earth wanted to tour at the same time," Oskar said. We only got hold of venues that ran around a thousand people. All dates sold out in five minutes, but the premises were too small and we went back.

– I feel that I had been clear that the tour was one step along the way, that it was the next turn that would give revenue. At the same time, they were hugely profiting from merch, streaming

figures skyrocketed and their social media doubled. But when they got home and understood that the tour itself did not generate any money, I think the air went out of them.

Oskar and Emilio believe that the situation was basically about lack of communication.

"The importance of good communication is probably the most difficult part of this industry," Emilio said. To listen, be clear and make everyone understand what is happening. I see similar things arise almost all the time.

“Everything has a best-before date, but it’s still been heavy. For ten years I was a driver, therapist, big brother, friend, creative sounding board... Above all, it's a sadness to lose the friendship. It could have been solved so much easier if communication worked.

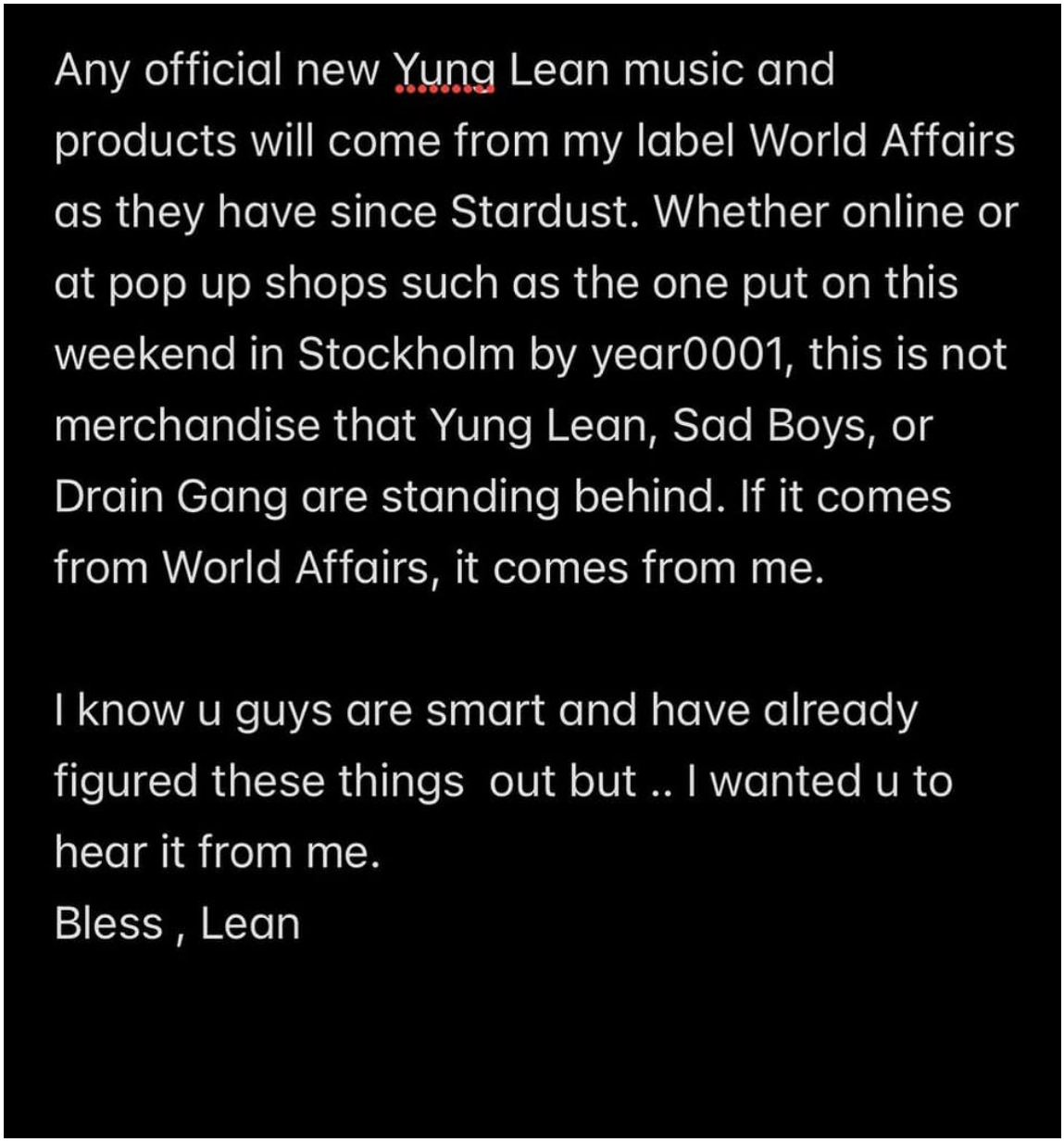
Oskar:

"Instead of talking to us about a business dispute, they chose to go public and use their fanbase against us. It has had consequences.

"People have come into my record store and been threatening to my wife. They've stood outside and thrown stuff at the entrance. We've been persecuted in the street and I've had to escort my wife home. Such things have made it not feel fun to talk about this openly. I didn't want to risk it escalating further.

Neither Jonathan Leandoer nor his current manager have wanted to give any comment for this article. Beyond Yung Lean's instagram post, there has also been no major joint statement from Sad Boys and Drain Gang on the conflict. Instead, it has been hinted about it in various interviews and on social media.

In February this year, Bladee told Pitchfork that “much wasn’t what we thought it was, so we needed to part ways.” Earlier this fall, the unreleased Yung Lean song “Give me my money”, where he sings “my old manager still owns me money”. Yung Leans and Bladee's latest project has come out on their start-up companies, World Affairs and Trash Island.



The statement Yung Lean posted on his Instagram in November 2024.

At the moment, legal discussions are ongoing between the previously-shaven artists and the company, but no trial is pending. According to Year001, it remains to agree on how the previously concluded agreements should be handled, and a settlement is close.

The main cause of the conflict, Emilio and Oskar suspect, is that Lean and the other artists simply wanted to run their own business.

“In general, I think they were so big that they wanted to continue to build on what we started. Maybe they felt they no longer fit

with us and our brand. And because the agreements were optionless, there was no problem for them to move on," Emilio said.

The negative attention of **recent years** has also focused on Year0001's business model. Their alternative setup, which collects record sales, management, touring, merch, and more, under the same roof, is controversial in the industry. Critics believe that the model can disadvantage artists through lower revenues, as the company takes part in several revenue streams, and that the influence over all parts of the process can limit artistic freedom.

Linda Portnoff, Doctor of Economics who has researched financial flows in the music industry, describes such agreements as tricky. Especially since the relationship between company and artist often changes over time.

"In the beginning, the artist is often weaker and the company sits on the greater power, as they take risks and invest. As the artist grows and starts generating revenue, it gets more options and can make demands.

Since there is no given template for that type of arrangement, each agreement becomes unique and the perception of what is fair can be difficult to establish.

"The parties almost always have different opinions about what value they themselves create and how it should be distributed.

She herself is skeptical but points out that the model does not lack benefits. An artist early in his career, in need of capital, can get a simple solution and time to focus on the music.

It can work if you do it the right way. But I think it's easier in theory than in practice. There is a high risk of it leading to

conflict surfaces, says Linda Portnoff.

According to Year001, the views of their working model have varied over the years. In the beginning, many industry colleagues thought the set-up sounded strange. Five years later, when the company was done with Steven Machat, they wanted to bid for lunch.

"Then we were hailed as geniuses," Oskar said. They wondered how two managers took artists from zero budget to several albums released and fifteen hundred tickets sold in New York and LA. But the truth was that we chose what felt most natural based on our artists and the situation.

As a manager, you literally earn nothing in the early years. Building an artist from zero costs a lot. So in our world it was a discounted deal. You get a team that does everything you need and ensures that your interests are prioritized. Then we share the revenue equally for x number of years.

“But we also have to look in the mirror,” Oskar continues. If another record label is better for our artists, we'll go there right away. Can they make our artists ten times bigger, so absolutely. The manager's fee of twenty percent of ten million is more than fifty percent in a million. It's simple math.

Losing artists affects the economy, but it's still too early to draw any major conclusions. However, it is clear that the company has not had to terminate any staff.

The clearest change is a restructuring. Since 2024, Year0001 has been part of Oskar’s new label group Arketype, which brings together several record labels with different focus. The aim is to enable new artist collaborations outside Year0001’s highly profiled brand.

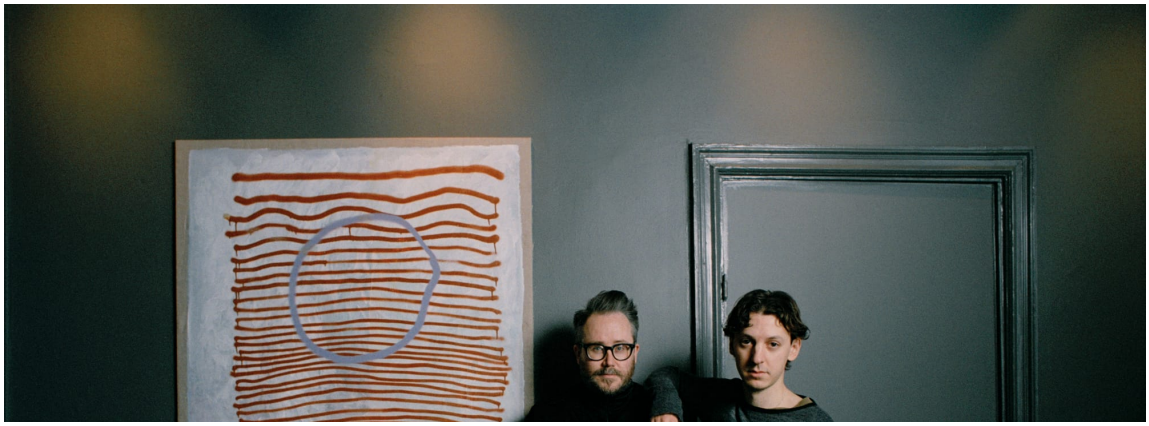
On the office floor it is hardly noticeable at all, the work is going on as usual.

Last autumn, the French ambient producer Malibu **released** their debut album on Year001, shortly thereafter, they released Anna von Hausswellf's sixth album. It was named DN's best Swedish album, hailed in international press and featured when P3 Guld recently released the nominations for next year's gala - where even Viagra Boys received three nominations. Among the company's newer artists are London duo Yawning Portal and Scanian artist Namasanda. Together, they form part of the year0001's next generation.

2025 celebrates Year0001 of the tenth anniversary. When the founders think about the last decade, they feel pride.

"We probably haven't had time to lift our eyes really," Oskar said. We have influenced others in the industry to run companies in our way, it feels awesome. You think back to how far we have taken. From the beginning, when it all happened on pure energy and we were able to get a finished album and release it two weeks later. Today we are working planned and purposefully in a completely different way.

"Now we live even closer to the performers," he continued. We are keen to understand what every artist wants in the long run. In other industries, there is a fixed plan for the next ten years that will not change. Artists often change.



(Picture: Sion Sareld)

Mohamed Yussuf (b. 1988) is a journalist and author. In 2025, he debuted with the reportage book Nation by poets. *He has previously written for Dagens Nyheter and Filter.*